



Advent Wreaths: Origins and Uses

- » Explore the history and tradition of using Advent wreaths in personal and corporate worship.
- » Learn about the candle colors and how to use the wreath.
- » Read aloud the weekly devotions and prayers written by members of the Pittsburgh Seminary community.



WHERE DID THE ADVENT WREATH COME FROM?

Traditions are funny.

By their very nature, they transcend time and connect us to history. This is true with family traditions that draw us closer to our own heritage. It's true with congregational traditions that remind us where we've come from. And it's true with wider traditions, like national holidays.

But sometimes, the source of a tradition gets lost. It can be tough to remember where the custom began or why.

The Advent wreath is a great example of a tradition with a lost origin. Many families and churches use Advent wreaths, progressively lighting candles as they prepare for Christmas. But why? When did Christians start using Advent wreaths?

The history is complicated and uncertain. Some draw parallels to ancient practices of yule logs. Others note the parallels to the candles on a menorah. These connections are interesting and worthy of pursuit, but they don't answer the question. When did Christians begin using Advent wreaths?

One story that has begun circulating in recent years focuses less on historical parallels and instead focuses on the first documented uses of modern-style Advent wreaths. Tradition has pinpointed one person in one place—Johann Hinrich Wichern in Germany.

Wichern was a Lutheran pastor in 19th century Germany. In the winter of 1839, students at the school that Wichern served became increasingly excited about Christmas. To help the children prepare for Christmas, Wichern mounted candles on a wagon wheel, lighting them progressively to mark the passage of time.¹

Gradually, the tradition made its way to the United States. A 1922 *Lutheran Magazine* highlighted a similar practice that a Lutheran school in Wexford, Pa., had employed for years. By this time, however, the candles had shifted from a wagon wheel to a wreath. Also, the school used 28 candles, rather than the four or five typically used today.²

Some Protestant groups in the 19th century resisted liturgical practices such as Advent or even the use of candles in general. One writer went so far as to say that "No

church can be called truly Protestant where there are either lights for ceremonial purposes or an altar."³

The resistance softened throughout the 1900s. After 10 decades, toward the turn of the century, some of the staunchest opponents of liturgical practices such as Advent wreaths began to embrace their use. As a result, the number of books published about Advent practices began to rise.⁴

Today, Advent wreaths have been largely accepted as a way to prepare for Christmas. In liturgical or evangelical congregations, in High-Church or Low-Church settings, the progressively lighted candles now signal the coming of Christmas.

WHERE DO THE COLORS COME FROM?

Advent candles often follow a specific a specific color scheme. Typically, the candles for weeks one and two are purple, and the candle for week three is pink, or rose. The fourth candle returns to purple, and a white candle is sometimes used on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

These colors are connected to the traditional liturgical colors for Advent. Some scholars trace the use of purple or violet during Advent all the way back to the 13th century.⁵

In short, purple or violet has come to symbolize preparation and is thus frequently used during Lent and Advent. The switch to pink or rose on the third week is a much younger tradition, but does date back at least to the mid-19th century and symbolizes a rest from the intense preparation of the other weeks—an opportunity to experience the joy of the preparation.

HOW DO I USE AN ADVENT WREATH?

Since its origins are far from clear, it is difficult to identify a "correct" or "incorrect" way to use an Advent wreath. Historically, the number of candles may have been four, or five, or 28. Nonetheless, there are some roughly consistent ways that people have begun to use Advent wreaths.

The following chart outlines one system of symbolism often used to celebrate Advent.

3 For a fascinating example of Protestant resistance to liturgical objects and practices, see *The Image of the Cross and Lights on the Altar in the Christian Church, and in Heathen Temples Before the Christian Era, Especially in the British Isles: Together with the History of the Triangle, the Dove, the Floral Decorations, the Easter Eggs, and Other Heathen Symbols*. Toronto: Hunter, Rose and Co, 1879.

4 All faiths calendar. 2005. *Publishers Weekly* 252, no. 45: S16-S16. All faiths calendar. 2003. *Publishers Weekly* 250, no. 46: S16-S16.

5 For a great history of the liturgical colors, see Legg, J. Wickham, 1882. *Notes on the history of the liturgical colours; a paper read before the S. paul's ecclesiological society, on Thursday, January 13th, 1881*, London: J.S. Leslie.

1 For a brief synopsis of the story, see: Manning, Kathleen. 2015. Why are advent candles pink and purple? *U.S. Catholic* 80, no. 11: 48-48.

2 For the full account of the Wexford School's Advent celebrations, see: White, Charles W. 1922. Ministering to the fatherless. *Lutheran Woman's Work* 15, no. 12.

Day	Key Word	Themes	Candle Color
First Week of Advent	Hope	Christ's Return	Purple
Second Week of Advent	Peace	Preparation, John the Baptist	Purple
Third Week of Advent	Joy	Rejoicing that the Lord is near; light in the midst of darkness	Pink or Rose
Fourth Week of Advent	Love	Christ as the incarnation of divine love	Purple
Christmas Eve		The arrival of Christ	White
Christmas Day		The Incarnation	

For a study leading through the themes of Advent, it may be beneficial to turn to Don McKim's "Illuminating Advent."⁶ It also may be helpful to light the appropriate candle or candles before reading a daily or weekly devotion, such as that provided by Pittsburgh Seminary.

Access the Seminary's Advent Devotional online at www.pts.edu/devotional.

If you choose to use an Advent wreath this year, in your home or in your church, the following devotions reflect on the themes that are paired with the four Sundays of Advent. The passages included are non-traditional, but offer a chance to reflect on each theme in a new way. Feel free to use them in private devotions, in corporate worship, or however you see fit!

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT—HOPE

PSALM 94

1 O LORD, you God of vengeance,
you God of vengeance, shine forth!
2 Rise up, O judge of the earth;
give to the proud what they deserve!
3 O LORD, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?
4 They pour out their arrogant words;
all the evildoers boast.
5 They crush your people, O LORD,
and afflict your heritage.
6 They kill the widow and the stranger,
they murder the orphan,
7 and they say, "The LORD does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive."
8 Understand, O dullest of the people;
fools, when will you be wise?

9 He who planted the ear, does he not hear?
He who formed the eye, does he not see?
10 He who disciplines the nations, he who teaches
knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise?
11 The LORD knows our thoughts,
that they are but an empty breath.
12 Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD,
and whom you teach out of your law,
13 giving them respite from days of trouble,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.
14 For the LORD will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage;
15 for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.
16 Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who stands up for me against evildoers?
17 If the LORD had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.
18 When I thought, "My foot is slipping,"
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.
19 When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.
20 Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who contrive mischief by statute?
21 They band together against the life of the righteous,
and condemn the innocent to death.
22 But the LORD has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.
23 He will repay them for their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the LORD our God will wipe them out.

⁶ McKim, Donald K. and Mark D. Hinds. 2011. *Illuminating advent*. Being reformed: Faith seeking understanding. Louisville, Ky.: Congregational Ministries Pub., Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

DEVOTIONAL

Written by Jim Durlless, PTS alum

James Luther Mays begins his commentary on Psalm 94 by stating that the theme of the psalm can be found in the line from the hymn "This Is My Father's World" which affirms that, "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

There are, indeed, many times in life when "the wrong" seems so strong. There are times when we look around us and all we see are violence, injustice, suffering, loneliness, and hopelessness. It is at those times that we join the psalmist in praying that God will rid the world of all "the wrong" that we see around us and that God will bring renewal to our communities, transforming what seems to be a hopeless end into endless hope.

During this season of Advent, hold tightly to the affirmation that God is still in control—that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

PRAYER

Almighty God, we affirm that, though the wrong seems oft so strong, you are the ruler yet. We join with the psalmist of old in praying that you will rid our world, our communities, and our homes of all of the wrong that we see around us, this Advent season and throughout the year. Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT—PEACE

ISAIAH 2:1-4

1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
2 In days to come
 the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
 and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3 Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the
 house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
 and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations,
 and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears
 into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall
 they learn war any more.

DEVOTIONAL

Written by Ron Cole-Turner, PTS faculty

Deafened as we are by all the noise that clamors for our attention, sometimes we wish that One Voice would rise above the rest as the highest mountain towers over foothills, that everyone else would just be silent, and that the whole world would hear the message of peace echoing from the mouth of God. We know that is not likely to happen soon.

Disheartened as we are by violence so sickening that it makes us want to shut our eyes, sometimes we wish that One Judge would right our wrongs and bring such peace that weapons are refashioned as farm tools. Not much chance of that, either.

And yet we hope. Despite the evidence, the long wait, the rage, or the bombs. We hope because above it all we hear a voice, not a booming voice from the highest mountain, but in the cry of a child in the night. For thus it is that Peace is born.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Savior, Jesus Christ, God with us. How we need you! If our night is dark, shine all the more with the radiance of your light. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT—JOY

PSALM 90

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
3 You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.
5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.
7 For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.
10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.
11 Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
12 So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.
13 Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.
16 Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.
17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!

DEVOTIONAL

Written by Joseph Hedden Jr., PTS alum

Is there any time in American culture more thinly sentimental than “the holiday season”? There is an expectation, even in the church, that we must be happy in December surrounding ourselves with plastic and neon trinkets which shout “GLAD TIDINGS!” One almost feels morally inferior for admitting any nuanced emotion beside a shallow cheer.

How refreshing, then, this Advent to turn to Psalm 90! Psalm 90 is a realist’s view of the tough moments in life. No tinsel and hot cocoa here. Rather, the Psalmist truthfully reports the alienation of humanity, being bound as we are by mortality and sin. Alongside our human experiences of dead-ends and bramble bushes, fears and anger, we discover the source of true joy: God and God’s works. God’s revelation pierces human struggle and a deep and authentic joy emerges (verse 14). May we all experience such joy this Advent.

PRAYER

O God, you have been our dwelling place throughout the ages. As we reflect back on our lives, we can see your hands at work, molding us and shaping us. May we encounter you deeply today and may we be joyful in your unending love and grace. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT—LOVE

MATTHEW 22:34-46

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 and a second is like it:

‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” 41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42 “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” 43 He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44 ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? 45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

DEVOTIONAL

Written by Laura Strauss, PTS alum

The greatest commandment and the commandment which compliments it function best in unity. Perhaps, we are tempted to believe that it is easy to love God. We study God’s Word, gather for worship, and pray. However, we deceive ourselves when we believe that this alone demonstrates love. The love that our Lord requires found in the devotions listed above, and in the way we love those God has placed along our path. The frustrations of life lived in the midst of fallen humanity tempts the Christian to hide in the solace of God’s embrace. Yet, the call upon the believer is to love God through moving from God’s embrace into the messy confines of our called communities. This is more than Bible study, worship, and prayer. But with the Spirit at work in our devotions, we learn to love the difficult as a means to love God.

PRAYER

Loving God, you have called us to love a world that is often challenging in our eyes. Soften our hearts toward your people that we may love them as you, in your mercy, have loved us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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